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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays May 10, 2005

In 2002, terrorists assassinated an American diplomat in front of his home in Amman, Jordan. Lawrence Foley, an employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development, was a dedicated public servant working to bring economic growth and humanitarian aid to a troubled region. But to his terrorist attackers, he was political symbol and a “soft target.”

Recognizing a growing threat to U.S. personnel, the Department of State has done a great deal to harden embassies and missions. State’s Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, under the leadership of General Charles Williams, has pursued an ambitious, risk-driven program to construct secure new facilities and retrofit or reconfigure older workspaces to reduce vulnerabilities.

But as embassy and consulate compounds are fortified, U.S. government personnel and their families living and working outside those walls draw the aim of criminals and terrorists looking for the next tier of targets. So hardening official buildings is not enough. The security of soft targets hinges on the harder tasks of building personal awareness and sustaining institutional vigilance. Adding cement to the physical plant is the easy part. Precious lives depend on strengthening protections for America’s human capital abroad.

In a report for the Subcommittee released today, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concludes the State Department has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy that clearly identifies safety and security requirements or the resources needed to better protect U.S.

officials and their families from terrorist threats abroad. Despite recommendations by several panels since the late 1980s, programs to enhance security outside the embassy walls remain a porous patchwork. No hands-on antiterrorism training course is required for U.S. personnel and dependents going overseas. Host nation cooperation varies widely. Federal departments and agencies do not effectively or consistently monitor personal security programs.

These desultory efforts are too easily overwhelmed by the powerful human tendency to conclude, “It can’t happen to me!” or “If it’s going to happen, there’s nothing I can do about it.” Defeating the myths of invulnerability and inevitability requires teaching government employees and their families how to recognize threats, how to take reasonable precautions, and how to handle themselves appropriately in menacing situations. Those lessons need to be reinforced regularly as part of a strategic focus that links embassy security and personnel safety to harden today’s soft targets against the very real threats waiting outside.

The terrorist attack on the school in Beslan, Russia last year reminded the world once again that terrorism is blind to moral boundaries. Terrorists recognize no zone of safety for the innocent. American officials and their families abroad must be equipped to maintain a perimeter of personal safety wherever they go.

Despite many studies, numerous recommendations, several efforts and some progress, our witnesses this afternoon will describe just how much must still be done to shield America’s soft targets abroad. We look forward to their testimony.